

Installment #10

Keep in Step with the Spirit

¹ Some people came from Judea and started teaching the Lord's followers that they could not be saved, unless they were circumcised as Moses had taught. ² This caused trouble, and Paul and Barnabas argued with them about this teaching. So it was decided to send Paul and Barnabas and a few others to Jerusalem to discuss this problem with the apostles and the church leaders.

³ The men who were sent by the church went through Phoenicia and Samaria, telling how the Gentiles had turned to God. This news made the Lord's followers very happy. ⁴ When the men arrived in Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church, including the apostles and the leaders. They told them everything God had helped them do. ⁵ But some Pharisees had become followers of the Lord. They stood up and said, "Gentiles who have faith in the Lord must be circumcised and told to obey the Law of Moses."

⁶ The apostles and church leaders met to discuss this problem about Gentiles. ⁷ They had talked it over for a long time, when Peter got up and said: "My friends, you know that God decided long ago to let me be the one from your group to preach the good news to the Gentiles. God did this so that they would hear and obey him. ⁸ He knows what is in everyone's heart. And he showed that he had chosen the Gentiles, when he gave them the Holy Spirit, just as he had given his Spirit to us. ⁹ God treated them in the same way that he treated us. They put their faith in him, and he made their hearts pure. ¹⁰ Now why are you trying to make God angry by placing a heavy burden on these followers? This burden was too heavy for us or our ancestors. ¹¹ But our Lord Jesus was kind to us, and we are saved by faith in him, just as the Gentiles are.

¹² Everyone kept quiet and listened as Barnabas and Paul told how God had given them the power to work a lot of miracles and wonders for the Gentiles. ¹³ After they had finished speaking, James said: My friends, listen to me! ¹⁴ Simon Peter has told how God first came to the Gentiles and made some of them his own people. ¹⁵ This agrees with what the prophets wrote,

¹⁶ "I, the Lord, will return
and rebuild David's
fallen house.

I will build it from its ruins
and set it up again.

¹⁷ Then other nations will turn to me
and be my chosen
ones.

I, the Lord, say this.

¹⁸ I promised it long
ago."

¹⁹ "And so, my friends, I don't think we should place burdens on the Gentiles who are turning to God. ²⁰ We should simply write and tell them not to eat anything that has been offered to idols. They should be told not to eat the meat of any animal that has been strangled or that still has blood in it. They must also not commit any terrible sexual sins.

²¹ *We must remember that the Law of Moses has been preached in city after city for many years, and every Sabbath it is read when we Jews meet.*”

²² *The apostles, the leaders, and all the church members decided to send some men to Antioch along with Paul and Barnabas. They chose Silas and Judas Barnabas, who were two leaders of the Lord's followers.* ²³ *They wrote a letter that said:*

“We apostles and leaders send friendly greetings to all of you Gentiles who are followers of the Lord in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia. ²⁴ We have heard that some people from here have terribly upset you by what they said. But we did not send them! ²⁵ So we met together and decided to choose some men and to send them to you along with our good friends Barnabas and Paul. ²⁶ These men have risked their lives for our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁷ We are also sending Judas and Silas, who will tell you in person the same things that we are writing. ²⁸ The Holy Spirit has shown us that we should not place any extra burden on you. ²⁹ But you should not eat anything offered to idols. You should not eat any meat that still has the blood in it or any meat of any animal that has been strangled. You must also not commit any terrible sexual sins. If you follow these instructions, you will do well. We send our best wishes.”

³⁰ *The four men left Jerusalem and went to Antioch. Then they called the church members together and gave them the letter.* ³¹ *When the letter was read, everyone was pleased and greatly encouraged.* ³² *Judas and Silas were prophets, and they spoke a long time, encouraging and helping the Lord's followers.* ³³ *The men from Jerusalem stayed on in Antioch for a while. And when they left to return to the ones who had sent them, the followers wished them well.* ³⁴ *But Paul and Barnabas stayed on in Antioch, where they and many others taught and preached about the Lord.¹*



While at the University I worked in the design department of a prominent store in downtown Houston. I would get off of the elevator on the ground floor, take a left and walk down a dimly lighted hallway for three doors to my office. This particular day I had gotten off of the elevator and had just passed the first door when I heard someone say, “Jerry.” I stopped, wheeled around, and looked at the half door with the top part swung back. There was only one person in at the moment, a lady at a sewing machine. “Yes,” I said. “Is it true what I hear; that you are going to be a preacher?” she asked. “Yes, that’s true!” “Well,” she remarked, “do you belong to (a particular church).” “No, I am Methodist,” I said. “Too bad,” she remarked, the smile gone from her face, “You are going to hell.”

¹ Acts 15:1-34, CEV.

That occurred early in my ministry, which wasn't much of a ministry at the time. I don't recall what I said but I mumbled something and walked on down to my office. Over the next few weeks I did some heavy reading on Christian denominations. I found seventeen church organizations which claimed to be (at the time) the 20th century extension of the apostolic church. In order to be "safe" I would have had to join them all!² I am afraid that after many years the situation is no better. I am sure you have had some experience like mine. Perhaps someone has said that you needed some extra experience or belong to a particular church if you are going to follow the Lord. The church seems to be shot through with competing groups, with humility left standing at the door.

Studies have been done on this situation of why many Christians seem to become fixed in their faith and judgmental against those who do not follow the Lord like they do. In a very good book entitled The Sacraments in Religious Education and Liturgy, the authors, Browning and Reed, say that some Christians get in a rut that becomes "conformist and conventual (in that the person tends not to be able to step outside of the system of values, beliefs, or practices long enough to do genuinely autonomous reflection and reevaluation)."³ For example, I have met people who were raised in a Baptist, Methodist, Roman Catholic, Pentecostal church and Church of Christ environment and you could not move them with a bomb. Ask them to rethink their theological position is like asking them to cut off their right arm. Consequently, many Christians will remain firmly ensconced in their commitment to the water baptism of adults only in deep water, and that's that!

For generations America has been proud of itself for being a "melting pot" for the world. On the base of the Statue of Liberty, the statue itself speaks to the nations of Europe:

Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed, to me:
I lift my lamp beside the golden door.

² Actually, there were many more than seventeen; I just did not probe long enough. I have since then.

³ Robert L. Browning and Roy A. Reed, The Sacraments in Religious Education and Liturgy, 1985, p. 108. Read this statement carefully, weighing each word. It is very important.

That is a noble invitation. Nonetheless we still have the same kinds of problems that plagued the Apostle Paul: racial clashes, class warfare, different languages, and many things that split the tired, the poor, the huddled masses, the homeless, the tempest-tossed, and the wretched refuse of Galatia. In a sense, the Statue of Liberty could be the gospel call to people today. Send them here...to America and we will help them breathe free!⁴ Likewise, help them open their hearts to Christ and he will help them really breathe free!

The Christian Magna Carta

The Book of Galatians has often been referred to as the Christian Magna Carta. Written in 1217 AD, the Latin text of the Magna Carta (literally “Great Paper”) was a document which restricted the powers of the King according to established law. It is obvious that the Magna Carta established a precedent in which even the highest legal human powers were subjected to a yet higher law: the law of God!

The Book of Galatians is called the Christian Magna Carta in that the highest of human powers, and spiritual powers, are subject to the will of God established and finalized by Jesus Christ. There is no higher power than the will of the Holy Trinity known as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Book of Galatians sets forth in only six chapters the essence of Christian belief regarding salvation, spiritual awareness, and ethical principles. From this chapter to the end of our study, this book sets the tone and subject matter for Christian faith.

From this point on, we will take a deep look at each of Paul’s thirteen books (or letters) as our Magna Carta under three headings: (1) Polemical Theology, (2) Spiritual Knowledge, and (3) Living the Faith. There is no way we can treat these headings to the full in our review of each of Paul’s letters. We can, however, lay bare the essence of these three headings and suggest their meaning for Christian life today. Each of Paul’s letters was written to a group or person under stress because of their profession of Christian faith. Thus, **Polemical Theology** is in a sense argumentative theology, proving a point, resisting the theology of another or setting forth one’s point of view with vigor. **Spiritual Knowledge** is the deepening of one’s knowledge of God through prayer, searching the Scripture, and any other way that opens the meaning of Scripture or ex-

⁴ I am not equating America with Christianity. In many respects America is not a Christian country. The cross is what we Christians invite people to; the cross and Christ will make people free!

plains the meaning of revelation (“to unveil,” “to reveal,” as to make known what was hidden). Finally, **Living the Faith** is concerned with the relational aspects of Christian faith, such as loving one’s neighbor and/or one’s enemy.

It is very important that you read as carefully as possible the letter under study, such as Galatians in full for today. Get ready for a blessing as we work with the written Word of God and open our hearts and minds to His will for our lives.

Polemical Theology: There are several points of theology (“the study of God and of God’s relation to the world”⁵) of major concern to Paul in this letter, which many think was written from prison. Reading carefully, we see the following emphases in Galatians: (1) Paul’s defense of his “call” to ministry, (2) empowering of the Gentiles through the Gospel, (3) the “Law” is works-righteousness compared with grace and faith in the Gospel (4) salvation is by faith, as far back as Abraham.

Two of these four concerns plague the church today: **(1)** thus, **Polemical Theology** is in a sense argumentative theology, proving a point, resisting the theology of another or setting forth one’s point of view with vigor. **Spiritual Knowledge** is the deepening of one’s knowledge of God through prayer, searching the Scripture, and any other way that opens the meaning of Scripture or explains the meaning of revelation (“to unveil,” “to reveal,” as to make known what was hidden). Finally, **Living the Faith** and **(2) salvation by faith, not works-righteousness.**

The idea of God calling a person, male or female, to a ministry of preaching or some other aspect of Gospel work is today skating on thin ice. Such an idea means not only that there is a God but that God is deeply concerned about human behavior and seeks to do something about it. Of course, this is in large part the heart of the Gospel: human beings, left to themselves, sin against the love of God and against the moral standards of the human community. On the other hand, the notion of a “call” to God’s work means that humans can hear such a call, in fact may be tuned into hearing such a call, whether or not they do anything about it.

In my years of work for the church I have met many people who told me that God called them to His work and that, for reasons even they do not know, they turned it down.

⁵ Merriam Webster’s Online Dictionary.

These persons include my father, who one afternoon shared with me that he thought he should have gone into the ministry. In Galatians the Apostle Paul gives his call in detail. I think I know at least part of the reason my dad did not pursue a vocation in ministry. His family thought he was a fanatic because he taught Sunday School, much less becoming a pastor. This teaches us that as members of the church, we ought to pray for those people whom the Spirit of God is touching with His call to be a minister. We desperately need such people today; our culture is shot through with those in higher education and scientific careers who think ministry is a joke of some kind.

Coupled with this notion of call is the idea that salvation is the result of faith alone, not a reward for being good or doing some kind of works-righteousness. We will learn more about this topic when we study the Book of Romans. As for Galatians, Paul says we are justified by faith, not by the Law.

¹⁵ We are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners, ¹⁶ yet we know that no one is justified by the works of the law but by the faithfulness of Jesus Christ. And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we may be justified by the faithfulness of Christ⁶ and not by the works of the law, because by the works of the law no one will be justified.⁷

The “law” here is a reference to the Law of Moses. Paul says that Jews will not be saved by keeping the Law of Moses, for example; the Ten Commandments are good ethics but will not save. How then will Jews be saved? By faith in Jesus Christ! In just a few lines more Paul is clearer.

²⁰ I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me. So the life I now live in the body, I live because of the faithfulness of the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. ²¹ I do not set aside God's grace, because if righteousness could come through the law, then Christ died for nothing!⁸

This is to say that if salvation came through the law then Christ died for nothing. Again, if God saved us because we were faithful at worship, at Sunday School, were good neighbors, good parents, etc., then Jesus died for nothing. Paul will not accept that kind

⁶ Or “faith in Christ”.

⁷ Chapter 2, NET Bible.

⁸ Galatians 2, NIV, emphasis mine; see also Galatians 3:10-14 on works-righteousness.

of teaching! To him, that is heresy. In fact, you would think Paul attended some of our churches this past Sunday, where a kind of works-righteousness was proclaimed from the pulpit or taught in Sunday School.

It is very difficult for some people, even some Christians, to accept the biblical view of human nature. They prefer to think people are basically good by nature and left to ourselves we will surely do what is best. However, Galatians says we are in real trouble, that we are desperately in need of God's saving grace because left to ourselves we will surely fail! Christian author and teacher, C. S. Lewis, puts it this way for the person who says he can accept Jesus as a great moral teacher. Reflecting on Jesus' teachings that He heals, delivers from demons, is God, the Messiah, etc, Lewis says:

“This is the one thing we must not say [that Jesus is a great moral teacher]. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon; or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God.⁹

Spiritual Knowledge: Paul was keenly aware of the gulf between spiritual knowledge and ordinary knowledge obtained through testing, philosophy, and the wisdom of the ages. Not very many youngsters among first century Jews went to a school of any kind. You were fortunate if you lived in Jerusalem because then you could hook up with a teacher at the Temple.

In Galatians we speak of *spiritual knowledge* given by revelation to Paul. The Apostle says what he is sharing with the Galatians is “no lie.” He will say this many times in his written witness. It is important for him to establish a truthful witness about things unknown to the Jews and the Romans. And how will they know he is not lying? By his constant witness and the way in which he shows love to both friends and enemies.

⁹ C. S. Lewis, Mere Christianity, p. 52.

There is another question that needs an answer. Why does Paul take so long to consult other apostles about matters of faith? I think it is because of the depth of his experience with the Lord? Do you remember that he wrote in his witness that he experienced things too great to be repeated and too mysterious to be shared? It is wonderful to think that this man was given a special relationship with God, a relationship that began with his conversion and continued on special occasions throughout his life. I say “special occasions” because Paul also experienced fear when he was oppressed and anxiety over the weight of his ministry, especially as concerns the problems of the churches, such as what he experiences with the Galatian churches.

It is important to note that Paul does not insist that the Galatians have the kind of spiritual awareness he has. At the same time, he does not think of himself as more spiritual than other apostles; indeed, as more spiritual or gifted than the Galatian Christians. This is an important lesson for us. We carry out our ministries in deep humility, not with a sense of superiority. He will later write that we should not think of ourselves more highly than we think of others, even though it is obvious that the ones to whom he writes are obviously in spiritual trouble. And Paul is also the “spiritual father” to some, a teacher to whom they should listen if they are to advance in faith.¹⁰ Humility is a lifestyle like that of the Lord Himself.

Living the Faith: Now, My friend, what do you see as you read this wonderful book of Galatians? Think about it. You see a man who is a real man...he is a leader. Right? He is a leader who is not afraid to lead. He chastises when he has to: “*I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—which is really no gospel at all*” (1:6); “*You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?*” (3:1).¹¹ Yet he deeply loves these people, calling them “*brothers and sisters*”¹² (1:11) and “*My dear children*” (4:19). Reread Galatians, looking for words and phrases that express love for the churches and their members.

¹⁰ Imitate me, Paul writes, and that without being arrogant.

¹¹ Today's New International Version. See also 4:8-9.

¹² *Ibid*, if you read other versions of Galatians you may read “*brothers*” instead of “*brothers and sisters*.” The reason for this is simple. This is what Paul meant. “*Brothers*” was an inclusive term in his time, as it often is in ours. This translator chooses to express Paul’s wider meaning in our style: “*brothers and sisters*.” For Paul it is also a term of endearment.

Also write down aspects of good leadership from this lesson that you could share with a small group or Sunday class.

In Galatians the Apostle Paul does something he rarely ever does, he rebukes another apostle by name. This was not just any apostle but the Apostle Peter! You have read the account of this confrontation in 2:11-14. What I learn from this brief story is that if I was traveling with the Apostle Paul I would be very careful to act *“in line with the truth of the Gospel.”* If I didn’t, I know now he would get me for sure! At the same time I would know that he willingly gives his life in ministry for me...and you.

The title of our lesson comes from this third section: **“Keep in Step with the Spirit.”** In terms of “keeping in step with the Spirit,” Paul speaks of living with true love.”¹³ Paul speaks a good deal about the Holy Spirit in Galatians. Ask yourself: **What would I have to do to “keep in step” with God’s Holy Spirit?** Can you find the places in Galatians where the following are mentioned?

1. The Spirit comes through having faith in Christ, not through the law.
2. Nobody can finish by human strength what the Spirit starts.
3. The Spirit works miracles, the law does not.
4. The Spirit was given to Abraham through faith.
5. The Spirit tells us that God is our Father.
6. The Jews are making trouble for those born of the Spirit.
7. The Spirit gives us assurance that we are accepted by Christ.
8. If the Spirit guides you, you will not fulfill selfish desires.
9. The Spirit “fights” against our desires.
10. The Spirit gives you control over the Mosaic Law.
11. God’s Spirit gives us all kinds of His wonderful gifts.
12. God’s Spirit gives us life; follow Him!
13. If you follow the Spirit you will harvest eternal life, but if you follow your selfish desires, you will inherit destruction.

To live the faith is to live in the Spirit!

Looking Ahead!

1. Study carefully a map of Paul’s Second Missionary Journey.
2. Read Acts 15:36-16:10 to prepare for Paul Second Journey.
We will begin that journey with Acts 15:36.
3. Is there a connection between Paul’s letter to the Galatians and Luke’s report in Acts 16:4,5?
4. We are told that *“during the night...”* (Acts 16:9,10) Is

¹³ *“The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.”* Galatians 5:6b, NIV.

this vision a kind of dream? How can we tell a
dream from a vision?

--Jerry Mercer
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